
Remembrance of a Dream 2002

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So we have come of age?

What do we do with the past?

Remember fondly?

Nostalgia? - Is it still what it used to be?

Let us try. No eulogy I promise, the truth not either.

Mythologies are closer to realities, and more pleasing.

When I met Jogen first I met India - not first - but it got shape. Many things got shapes then, contours which later softened, blurred, broke and some remained.

It was a small gallery somewhere in Paris —you get the name from some books better versed with facts —it was small place somewhere in 66 or 67, the year I mean. Possibly 68 - yes possibly — It was then that things got shape.

A large canvas exploded in pinks and whites, in a way I never saw, not because I couldn't have seen, but because I just never did. It was a large canvas, everything rushing to the edges, and other smaller ones, cramp and remaining inside the square. Reddish under dirty brown varnish representative of hell. I might get the title wrong, it was not pleasing, nor was it intended to. I couldn't judge, but it stuck. And I saw for the first time. The brush, the scalpel.

Of course, I was very young and I might interpolate thoughts from much later. But only then I became aware of things beyond my circle of reflection.

There were others besides Jogen, Prokashda, Amit, Bimal ... that were the painters. They left — I left — they East — I West. The icons remained, some more, some less.

After some time I drifted East too, and later I travelled and still later I went, possibly I fled, I will not tell you from what and why, mystifying what I hardly myself know. It was East. Greece and Anatolia, Persia and Afghanistan, the beautiful, the harsh yellows and the subtle greens. Coming from the cold it was the warmth. Memories rush up now, the blackened chambers besides the large Buddha, in the gloss of the soot filled ceiling the vignettes of the ages, deities in circles of flames. Cave after cave was my home, as was Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif, Tashkurgan, Farah, Obe, Balch and Kandahar. Names which now are spelled death. I saw the serenity, the warmth of the soft clay walls, the dusty roads with the pleasing water channels along its sides overshadowed from poplars so tall that the dust hid their tops. I could have looked deeper and would have seen beyond. But my eyes were set on the soft clay of the quilas, the

black spires of the nomad's tents, the mountain strongholds of lore, left ruined by ancient madness which I just understood as history gone by.

But then the fields were still planted with wheat, and melons, and the pasture lands filled with flocks of fat tailed sheep. I could not look beyond the surface yet.

But what am I to write and about whom? Of course Jogen, but I have to describe the way I met him, and so many others.

When I met Jogen again it was in Madras. The year? 69 or 70. I still was young then, but I had seen East when I walked over the Ferozpur border. Monsoon was breaking and I hitched all along the GT Road to Bengal on the top of trucks. I need not tell the stations on the way, the number of broken tyres. I lived in villages towered by the growth of bamboo, the dome of the Pipal and the Banjan Tree as large as the remaining world. What I understood as serenity there was surface again. The light of the morning, the burning dust at the evenings and a moon rising out of the bamboo-clump across the pond. But I saw the creepers of the gourd on the thatched shed of the cow, the ducks in the rice fields, the depilated temple with the terracotta plates, the fields of cane, the hands of the mistress of the house which raked up the ducks by the heads to set them on their way to the inner quarters to sleep under the masters bed. The surface of seeing became wider, I met the fisher man and the owner of the pond. The worker on the fields and the owner of the lands, the cutter of the grass and the owner of the cow, the collector of the toddy and the drinker of whine. I met the hand and the fish and the flower, the snake and the butterfly, the sacrificial knife and the split melon, the surface deepened.

Prakash Karmakar took me to the printers, deep into the bowls of the city. First we walked the riverine monsoon roads into the tributary side lanes into smaller and smaller creeks of the by lanes, and when we arrived, the fire of the type casters enlivened the greyiness of the type setters. My sight was obscured by the vapours and fumes but my view got clearer and clearer as Prakashda led me along into the lower circles. But he was my Beatrice too into the upper circles. I remember fondly his flat in Howrah, no more than a jump across the wall from the Botanical Garden, a Yamdoot ride on the reserve wheel of a bus to the Soda Fountain or some processions at Lenin Sarani.

But what it has to do with Jogen? You wait, I told you I was young and what I had seen till then was the Bamyan Buddhas, more Moghul arches than one needs in one life time, the Border near Ferozpur and later at Wagha, the Ghats there, and there and there. I had walked over the fields and swam in the ponds of Bankura, I walked into the bowls of Calcutta.

... I walked at the side of the twelve misty mountains, and the thousand miles in the depth of a graveyard...

When I met Jogen again I still was young but I knew the flower and the creeper of the gourd, the hands, the sheet that reveals and the one which covers, the folds of the saree, the probing hand and the sacrificed melon and pillows embroidered with love.

When I pace my rooms here in Vienna I can see a small photograph of Jogen, Kumkum and me sitting like the three monkeys, hearing all, seeing all and saying nothing. But what did we do there?

As I told I met Jogen again in Madras and he took me in, into that small garage with an annexed drivers one room quarter. It was a cosy little place overshadowed by coconut trees which belonged to the neighbours, but the nuts ended up to a good measure in our kitchen. Night-climbing of palm trees was in the curriculum of my village days. The large house shielded the little garage in its back yard. Although in the city, we had the benefit of the small garden with a few stands of high grown plantain stems, a mehendi tree and some other greenery. We drew the water with a bucket from the well. There was a cat too, belonging to nobody particularly, but tipping over our pots when there was only so much of a fish. This were the spheres of the "Remembered dreams" of Jogen. The creepers and flowers, the fish and the butterfly, the teacup, the hand the breast the serpent and the loom.

Now as I look at this photograph, I remember Kumkum who came from Calcutta, so did Amit to man a design studio of a silk merchant in Myslapore.

Madras was a city true, but one could still cross the Mount Road at any time of the day.

It was about that time that some artists of Madras, revolving around Panikkar had moved down south near the coast and founded an artist colony near the fishing village of Cholamandal. Discussions were heavy on art and art personalities, but I remember little on details. I was on a tour through the cityscape, and the outskirts. Jogen laboured in the Weavers Service Centre, drawing an income, I was doing some black marketing with my liqueur permit which I had as an alcoholic foreigner.

On the way to the Weavers Service Centre there was a milk-man's camp spread all over the road. Wooden fur-lined tummy calves were poked into the udder of cows who gave their milk in return. In the Weavers Service Centre were a number of different looms set up. I never had closely watched the working on hand looms, nor the dyeing of fabric. Now when I pass the picture of the fish above the creeper in our place in Vienna I know the bleeding diminishing inflamed spots are droplets of the

acids which segregated the pigments of the china ink into reds and browns. The acid which fastened the dyes to the thread. But this now fades.

At the evenings we went to the metal workshops near Parrys Corner, where tinker rejuvenated big cauldrons over a furnace. We picked through buckets full of ancient and broken pieces of bell metal, scavenging small images of gods and goddesses which crowded a sideboard, like eccentric tin soldiers. There were the Ganeshas and crawling Balakrishnas, and the arrayed dancing Krishnas on the hoods of Kalyia, the little house altar grew to take over a second shelf.

It was about that time a Mount Road gallery took Jogen's paintings in. Indeed the gallery was not on the Mount Road, it was in a quiet spot at the back of Spencers in the annexe of a rather modern looking building. There were the oscillating paintings in ink and silver fish, creepers, snakes, hands and flowers of the loom. The inflamed reds of the acid still worked bright. All the friends came, later some casual passers by. As already told, it was a quiet spot, and Madras was a quiet city, and the passers by were a quiet people. Some asked if these fish are eatables, others thought it to be illustrations for a natural history books, and if so what to do with the hands, the cups and the breasts. Considering the fashion in modern painting of the day of large canvases in bright colours of abstract symbolism Jogen's pictures were of an old worldly hue, subdued and soothing, there was no enigma in the form, but the composition disturbed people. So did the sensual appeal, if not of the fish or the hand so of the breasts, the wrinkled folds of cloths.

No sales of course.

And the stock of pictures grew. Stacks of them were there in the small garage, one more beautiful than the other. And Jogen went on stroke after stroke the white of the paper was chiselled into depth, stroke after stroke screeched the nib, wounding the surface. Splashes of acid spread like flower, the nib sorted it in petals, scales, buds, leaf or stems. It was lit by its inner universe. And only after the black was laid on.

Jogen's making of the universe was in the reverse, from the light into the darkness he led, till the message stood out against a black foreground. Jogen's patchy black is the proscenium behind which culture falls in a clear vocabulary. His world is ordered, but as in all order chaos lingers. In back of all there is the large canvas we saw in Paris, the expanse of whites and pinks. It is there I presume in all paintings, the old masterly portraits from the art school don't show but the large nude studies of the same days show. The handling of the mass by the movement of matter, it is there. But I have not set out in art critique, there will be competent people to do this. I just found

it a discrepancy between Jogen's organic treatment of surfaces and his obsession with cleanliness, which he expresses as "hygienic". There I never knew what he aspired. His order was expressed in little squares which he crossed diagonally again and again doodling while talking. There was also the diary and a long text on art from which he read to me and Liz when we crowded his little house in Madras as so often. We were puzzled then on his concept of his term "neat and clean" and could not categorise it. Now I think it has to do with mud plastered housewalls and courtyards,— nothing serious just the surface of wellbeing, the "hygiene" on an organic order. But I'm not sure yet, for once in Delhi, grieving for some pork sausages we went to a butcher whom Jogen asked whether his ware was produced "hygienically" which the poor man consented too, and we relished it after frying.

An other aspect of his order, indeed one of his opus magnum shows in a few ledgers in which all his pictures are accounted for, with a neat little row of measurements at the left and a sketch of the work at the right, also the whereabouts of works.

I might mix up occasions now, but after our meeting in Madras I was a regular visitor to India and we met at so many places. When Jogen married Shipra I was in Madhya Pradesh, exploring caves in the Vindhya and Sattapura mountains. Off and on we met in Madras, but when Jogen moved into the clock tower of Rashtrapatis Estate, it became the base camp for our expeditions into Central India too. Here we dumped equipment, books, and materials which Jogen and Shipra suffered with demureness. True the house was huge, but they welcomes us then as they did earlier in small places.

Looking back at my wanderings I see an endless list of friends extending more than the customary hospitality. Amit and Rani Sengupta, as Amit's parents in Bankura, Kumkum and his father Ananda Muni in Calcutta, Prakash Karmakar in Howrah and later Naini all became family.

Of course Rashtrapati Bhavan Estate then was not the high security zone it most probably is today. It allowed me a few glimpses behind the scene. Considering that the clock tower was the army band's quarters, there was ample space. Jogens studio was then in the former kitchen which was large enough to play badminton. I also slept there. When I opened the blinds in the morning a quiet and cool lawn was before me fenced by a hedge from the road. Standing in the window I could observe the morning work of the president grooms, two little turbaned men in white, squatting at the back of the royal coach, two pairs in front, chatting and smoking their beedies in the most unceremonial manner. When the coach stopped beside the large silk cotton tree it was for the grooms to take a turn at pee.

Jogen held the corridors of power decorated I hope, or better. I hope he could hold the decorations in the corridors of power at bay, or in place, as the matters may stand.

I remember at that time Jogen's art centred more on the human figure. There were the "Netas" in their twists and bends, their mudras of declaring, counting and ordering. The parrots of slokas and slogans, the fools under their caps grabbing for their toys. And again there were paintings in oil, I remember the babu with a ball and his counterpart of a longing Damayanti waiting for the swan. The people of the sagging flesh, their faces showing what the folds of their clothes reveal as well. Not to forget the realistic paintings of the American Doctor and his young beautiful wife. But these pictures will be out of reach for Jogen's admirers.

By that time Jogen was well in sight of the public eye, I lost track of pictures and their chronological and thematic implications, nor was I ever seeing them in that way. Still paintings like the Tiger in the Moonlit Night and the Ganeshas are still close to me, partly because some of them hung in the room I slept, partly because they were irritating. And then there was the large human form in the exhibition "A place for People." Still now I feel extremely happy when I see Jogen's paintings or prints from that time as props in Indian movies. And as I found, there is a whole array of that.

But here I do what I have not set out to do, talking about paintings. There are art critiques to do this, people who analyse, I just see.

During the eighties Christine and I came to India regularly with the first week of July to continue our researches on prehistoric art. As Christine's school closed on Friday, we invariably arrived in Delhi on Saturday, asked the airport bus to stop before Rashtrapati Bhavan Estate and went straight to Jogen's place where we met every year with the same scenery: the inhabitants of the house and assorted neighbours were assembled in the shaded sitting room watching TV, and invariably for several years they watched "Spaceship Enterprise". We tip-toed around the audience, to the room where our mosquito nets and other equipment from the previous season was stored, while Dr. Spok and others Glingonians battled it out undisturbed. "Spaceship Enterprise" later became my own personal family-soap, and I'm most probably the only person getting homesick for India while watching this mahabharat of outer space. Jogen was not in that, his soft corner was Mutt and Jeff which he got hooked on in the Madras edition of the "Hindu". So much to the direction of the influence on art and rasi in general. You Mutt, I Jeff, or the other way round, more does this world of universal dependencies not allow us any more.

It was during a longer consignment at the end of the eighties, when I worked on the prehistoric art of South India, that I also took up a casual study of the Indian calender image. This was very much considered as kitsch then. During a visit in Shanteniketan where Jogen, Shipra and Pupun had shifted after Delhi, I found Jogen elated seeing the old prints from the Ravi Varma and other presses, which was rather unusual. For most other modern artists were reserved on even mentioning the Indian calendar then, or the popular imagery as subject of serious consideration at all. Jogen was all the time aware that his own imageries come from all things visible. He has tried it in many media, I'm grateful that he allowed me to look over his shoulder, from time to time. He taught me, without teaching. I'm grate ful for that.
